

PROTECTING WOLVES IS ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST

By Dr. Michael W. Fox*

The first grey wolf, *Canis lupus*, probably appeared in Eurasia about 1 million years ago and migrated to N. America 750,000 years ago. Humans evolved much later, an estimated 300,000 years ago, and first came to North America 30,000 years ago as gatherer-hunters. Some revered the wolf as a teacher and exemplar of virtues, caring for their young and never killing more than they needed under the constraints of natural law and ecological sustainability. Systematic European colonization beginning some 5 centuries ago heralded sod-busting agriculture, timber industry deforestation and livestock production collectively linked to the persecution and near-annihilation of wolves and indigenous peoples. Today, we witness climate change and loss of biodiversity because planet Earth cannot sustain a human population of 8 billion demanding meat, spreading pesticides, and burning fossil fuels.

The wolf has become a symbol of a divided nation. Some want to protect them, while others want to kill them. Some people suggest that “more localized solutions are in order,” killing them as needed. But by whom and why? They never needed to be “managed” for 750,000 years. But the rabid Hunters for Hunters organization want them managed for trophy hunting and trappers wait in the wings to put out snares and steel-jaw traps. Livestock keepers can use non-lethal methods to protect their animals from wolves and other predators, as with the various breeds of guard dogs recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. As for local complaints about a few smaller dogs being occasionally killed by wolves, dogs, like children, should be supervised and not allowed to run free where there are predators and traps.

The foundation of democracy is based equal rights for all protected under the law in maintaining peaceful coexistence. The divergent interests of various segments of society can undermine and even destroy this foundation if there is not an overarching, unified sensibility of respect for all life. That includes wolves. It is notable that the national environmental group Nonhuman Rights Project is calling on Gov. Spencer Cox to veto a bill that Utah lawmakers passed in early 2024 that prohibits the use of legal personhood in cases involving various entities including any member of a species that is not a human being. In contrast, legal personhood has been signed into law in New Zealand for the Whanganui River and Māori’s Urewera lands. Now Māori and Pacific leaders are proposing the same for whales at the United Nations as a further step to protect the environment. For a democratic government and society to be sustainable the “personhood” of non-human animals such as wolves and whales should be recognized and protected under international law. Such a trans-species democracy would benefit humankind by virtue of the vital ecological services wolves and other species provide, and in the process, contribute, under the environmental banner of One Health, to our own well-being.

Minnesotans, living with the largest gray wolf population east of the Rockies, might rise to this occasion—now critically overdue with the climate change and extinction crises we all face today—and lead the states in maintaining wolf protection under the Endangered Species Act, if not also recognition of their personhood.

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